

**“BETWEEN TWO BROTHERS”**  
**Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-29**  
**June 19, 2005**  
**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**  
Copyright © 2005

Muslims, like Christians, tell the story of Hagar and Ishmael in their sacred scripture; however, they tell it slightly differently than we do. In the Islamic telling, God orders Abraham, in a test of faith, to take Hagar and Ishmael out to the parched desert in the valley of Mecca. Once there, Abraham puts a bag of dates and a skin full of water on the ground beside Ishmael, and walks away. Hagar turns and asks, “Abraham! Where are you going? Why have you left me in the wilderness with none to take pity on us? There is nothing here to eat or drink.” Abraham doesn’t answer. Then Hagar asks, “Has God commanded you to do this?”, and Abraham answers that God had so commanded him. Hagar protests no longer. She lets Abraham go, saying, “Then God will cause no harm to me.” Abraham leaves. Hagar struggles to provide for her son in the desert. Searching for water she runs seven times between Safa and Marwah, two small hills in the desert, yelling as she runs, “Oh Lord, forgive. Have mercy. Ignore our sins. Of course, you know what we know not—only you are the holy, the merciful one.” About to start her eighth trip, she collapses next to Ishmael. And God sends the angel Gabriel to them, who causes water to spring forth from the earth. Hagar and Ishmael settled in that place. Abraham was no stranger to them there. Most importantly, he returned to visit his son, building with him the shrine called the Kabbah, the holiest site in Islam, the place towards which all Muslims face as they perform their daily prayers.

For Christians, our sacred story runs from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and on from there. The story of Ishmael, it’s a sideline, of little account many would say. How many of you, when you learned your Bible stories growing up, were taught to care about Hagar and Ishmael? I certainly wasn’t. For Muslims, it is just the opposite: Abraham’s connection to Ishmael is central. With Ishmael, Abraham built the Kabbah. Through the descendants of Ishmael came Mohammed, the last and greatest of the prophets. The biblical stories that we Christians know—from Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, even down through John the Baptist and Jesus—all these characters are found in the Qu’ran, respected prophets of God all of them; but the story that runs through Ishmael—that’s the main event.

Two brothers, two versions of a story, two great faith traditions.

On one thing, both traditions agree: that as children, the two boys Isaac and Ishmael played together and loved each other, just as both were loved by their father. But when they were separated, when the question of who would inherit became paramount, it created a rift between the brothers, and the descendants of Isaac grew up knowing very little about the descendants of Ishmael, and the descendants of Ishmael knew equally little of the descendants of Isaac.

It has proved to be a tragic, and recently, a dangerous rift. I grew up, I would guess like many of you, thinking that Mohammadans—that’s what I first learned to call them—

Mohammadans were some exotic breed of pagans. I didn't know that Christians and Muslims share many of the same stories. I didn't know that both of our sacred books—the Bible and the Qu'ran—command the community of God to live lives of kindness, compassion, mercy, forbearance, generosity, love of God and neighbor, faithfulness and prayerfulness. I didn't know...anything, really, about Muslims until quite recently; because implicitly, if not explicitly, both my church and my culture taught me that the lives of “those people” were not important.

One of the highlights of my sabbatical was the opportunity I had through a class on “Islam in America” to meet a group of young Muslim women who live, go to school, and work in the Boston area. They are women from South Asia, Africa, the Middle East. African-american women, European-American woman. Half had grown up in this country; half had emigrated at some point in their childhood or youth. About two-thirds had grown up Muslim; the other third were converts, Islam being the fastest growing religion in America. There are now just over 2000 mosques and Islamic communities in the United States. The reason I share all these statistics is to underline that the young women I met fit absolutely no single stereotype. They varied in their politics, in their cultures, in the particulars of their religious observance, in the extent to which they accepted or rejected Western values. There is no time in a sermon to share with you even a fraction of what I learned from them. I promise I will do that in Adult Education in the Fall. What I do want to share with you this morning is that every single one of these women has had the experience of being treated badly—as if they were stupid, as if they were backwards, as if they were dangerous, as if they were hateful—simply because of the amazing ignorance that we Americans, many of us Christian Americans, hold about what it means to be a Muslim. One woman, a recent graduate of Tufts University, a feminist Egyptian woman who chooses to wear hijab, to cover her head with a scarf, was asked at a job interview, “Do you know what a computer is?” She didn't get the job. A Pakistani lawyer in her late twenties, picking up her young son at a day care center, was accosted by another mother who, after a simple “Hello ” burst out, “I don't know how you can stand to be part of a culture that makes you no more than a baby machine.” Ignorance. Stereotypes.

Too many of us, when we hear the word Muslim, we think monolithically: extremists, Taliban, terrorists. So here's an analogy for you. Islamic extremists are to Islam as X is to Christianity. Does anyone want to try to fill in the X? The response I got from Muslim scholars and lay people when I asked the question of them, how they would fill in the blank, was remarkably consistent. Muslim extremists are to Islam as White Supremist militias are to Christianity. The point here is that we're talking about fringe movements in both cases that are dangerous—and are growing. They are more tied to culture than to religion, although they want to validate themselves religiously. Both are movements that have to do with angry people feeling like their rightful place, whatever they feel that place to be, is threatened. And both movements lie far, far away from the central values and teachings of the religious tradition they claim.

A lot of us understand on one level that the media image we get of Islam is not the whole picture of the faith of Islam, but most of us haven't gone much further. Partly, we don't know where to start: where to research, what to read, and what to believe. That's one

piece of the problem. The other part is that most of us, myself included, have simply not cared enough to make the effort to learn, to understand, to appreciate, and then to reach out and try to build bridges between us and our cousins a hundred generations removed, descendants of two brothers, once friends, later estranged.

To work at ending that estrangement is, I believe, no longer optional. It is part of our religious obligation to know and cherish all of the children of God; and it is part of our religious obligation to work for peace in our world. That's pretty basic to our theology. If our children— all our children, and our grandchildren, and their children after that—are to have any future at all, we need to learn about, and understand, and, as far as possible, appreciate those who live and believe differently from us. Gone are the days when we could all just retreat to our separate corners of the globe. These days, our lives and fates are interconnected, irrevocably so. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know.

The reality is that even if we learn to understand and appreciate our Muslim brothers and sisters around the world, there will be conflicting interests and values enough between us to negotiate. I'm not naïve about that. Understanding is not going to make our problems simply fall away. They are too deep, too complicated; the history between us and parts of the Muslim world is too charged. But to make our problems harder because of our ignorance—that is both dangerous and counter to the will of the one God who calls us all beloved children.

Interestingly, the Genesis story of Isaac and Ishmael does not end with the two brothers estranged. There is injustice and good reason for enmity between them, but that is not the final word. In Genesis 25, Ishmael and Isaac come together, out of their separate places and destinies. They come together to bury their father, Abraham, bound together in their common sorrow. As I look at the future, I find a hesitant hope in that ending to the brothers' story. Hope—because maybe we, too, will some day find common cause with our Muslim sisters and brothers. Hesitant—because I hope that we do not have to wait for reconciliation until together we face a sorrow great enough to engulf us. In former days, the sons of Abraham lived and played together, one family bound in love, affection, and integrity. May God help us to find our way back to that future. Amen.